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Community
Learning

COMMITMENT AND MEANING by John W. Gardner

Individual Commitment

The mature individual, then, makes commitments to something larger than the service of his "convulsive little ego," to use William James' memorable phrase -- religious commitments, commitments to loved ones, to the social enterprise and to the moral order. In a free society we shall never specify too closely what those commitments should be.

The young person today would have a far easier time understanding the role of commitment in his life if he were not misled by the juvenile interpretation of the "pursuit of happiness" that is widely held today. It is not unduly harsh to say that the contemporary idea of happiness cannot possibly be taken seriously by anyone whose intellectual or moral development has progressed beyond that of a three-week-old puppy. From Aristotle to Jefferson, the men who have thought seriously about man's happiness would be startled to discover how that word is now interpreted.

The plain truth is that man is not capable of achieving the vegetative state implied in the current conception of happiness. Despite almost universal belief to the contrary, gratification, ease, comfort, diversion and a state of having achieved all one's goals do not constitute happiness for man. The reason Americans have not trapped the bluebird of happiness, despite the most frantic efforts the world has ever seen, is that happiness as total gratification is not a state to which man can aspire. The irony is that we should have brought such unprecedented dynamism

to the search for such a static condition.

It might be possible for an impoverished nation to harbor the delusion that happiness is simply comfort and pleasure and having enough of everything. But we have tried it, and we know better.

One can accept this fact without at the same time underrating the pleasant things in life. One is rightly suspicious of those who tell poor people that they should be content with poverty, or hungry people that hunger is ennobling. Every human being should have the chance to enjoy the comforts and pleasures of good living. All we are saying here is that they are not enough. If they were, the large number of Americans who have been able to indulge their whims on a scale unprecedented in history would be deliriously happy. They would be telling one another of their unparalleled serenity and bliss instead of trading tranquilizer prescriptions.

So we are coming to a conception of happiness that differs fundamentally from the storybook version. The storybook conception tells of desires fulfilled; the truer version involves striving toward meaningful goals -- goals that relate the individual to a larger context of purposes. Storybook happiness involves a bland idleness; the truer conception involves seeking and purposeful effort. Storybook happiness involves every form of pleasant thumb-twiddling; true happiness involves the full use of one's powers and talents. Both conceptions of happiness involve love, but the storybook version puts great emphasis on being loved,

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the truer version more emphasis on the capacity to give love.

This more mature and meaningful view opens up the possibility that a man might even achieve happiness in striving to meet his moral responsibilities, an outcome that is most unlikely under the present view unless his moral responsibilities happen to be uncommonly diverting.

Note that we speak of happiness as involving a "striving toward" meaningful goals, not necessarily the attaining of those goals. It is characteristic of certain kinds of human striving that the goals may be unattainable. The man who dedicates his life to the achieving of good government or to the combating of human misery may enjoy small victories but he can never win the longer battle. The goal recedes before him. Such striving, says Allport, "confers unity upon personality, but it is never the unity of fulfillment, of repose, or of reduced tension."¹

For this reason, the self-renewing man never feels that he has "arrived." He knows that the really important tasks are never finished -- interrupted, perhaps, but never finished -- and all the significant goals recede before one. The man who thinks that he has "arrived" has simply lost sight of those goals (or perhaps never saw them in the first place).

It is widely believed that man in his natural state will do only what is required to achieve strictly physical satisfactions; but, as every anthropologist can testify, this is not true. Primitive man is intensely committed to his social group and to the moral order as he conceives it. Man has to be fairly well steeped in the artificialities of civilization before he is able to imagine that indulgence of physical satisfactions might be a complete way of life.

Anyone with eyes in his head can see that most men and women are prepared to (and

do) undergo hardship and suffering in behalf of a meaningful goal. Indeed, they often actually court hardship in behalf of something they believe in. "Virtue will have naught to do with ease," wrote Montaigne. "It seeks a rough and thorny path."²

This is not to say that the aims that man conceives beyond the needs of the self are necessarily ones that would win our admiration. They may be characterized by the highest idealism or they may be crude, even vicious. That is a salient feature of the problem. If we make the mistake of imagining that only man's material wants need be satisfied and offer him no significant meanings, he is likely to seize upon the first "meanings" which present themselves to him, however shallow and foolish, committing himself to false gods, to irrational political movements, to cults and to fads. It is essential that man's hunger for dedication be directed to worthy objects.

It would be wrong to leave the implication that man is a selfless creature who only wishes to place himself at the service of some higher ideal. Having rejected the oversimplified view of man's nature as wholly materialistic and selfish, we must not fall into the opposite error. Man is a complex and contradictory being, egocentric but inescapably involved with his fellow man, selfish but capable of superb selflessness. He is preoccupied with his own needs, yet finds no meaning in his life unless he relates himself to something more comprehensive than those needs. It is the tension between his egocentrism and his social and moral leanings that has produced much of the drama in human history.

Of course each of us thinks his neighbor should be more dedicated. Our own passion for dedication is contaminated by selfishness, laziness and inconstancy, but our ardor for the other fellow's dedication is

pure and undefiled. The employer believes that employees should be more dedicated to their work (meaning usually that they should work harder for less pay). Older people think young people should be more dedicated. We are all familiar with the moral zeal that rises in our breast when we think of the standards the other fellow ought to live up to. Artemus Ward said, "I have already given two cousins to the war, and I stand ready to sacrifice my wife's brother...."

Nothing that is said here should be taken as an encouragement of such vicarious morality. Nor is anything that we say here to be taken as a defense of other misguided forms of commitment. There will never be a way of preventing fools from dedicating themselves to silly causes. There is no way to save some intense and unstable minds from a style of dedication that is in fact fanaticism.

Aside from these obvious dangers, there are other more subtle hazards in dedication. Anyone who thinks, for example, that a determination to "do good to others" is not accompanied by certain hazards should remember Thoreau's comment: "if I knew...that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life."³ Doing good to others may be an expression of the purest altruism or it may simply be a means of demonstrating one's superiority or of living vicariously.

Hunger for Meaning

Man is in his very nature a seeker of meanings. He cannot help being so any more than he can help breathing or maintaining a certain body temperature. It is the way his central nervous system works.

In most societies and most ages, however primitive they may have been technologically, man's hunger for meaning

was amply served. Though some of the religions, mythologies, and tribal superstitions with which the hunger for meaning was fed were crude and impoverished, they did purport to describe a larger framework in terms of which events might be interpreted.

With the arrival of the modern age many misguided souls conceived the notion that man could do without such nourishment. And for a breath-taking moment it did seem possible in view of the glittering promises which modern life offered. Under the banner of a beneficial modernity, the individual was to have security, money, power, sensual gratification and status as high as any man. He would be a solvent and eupeptic Walter Mitty in a rich and meaningless world.

But even (or especially) those who came close to achieving the dream never got over the nagging hunger for meaning.

At one level, man's search for meanings is objectively intellectual. He strives to organize what he knows into coherent patterns. Studies of perception have demonstrated that this tendency to organize experience is not an after-thought or the result of conscious impulse but an integral feature of the perceptual process. At the level of ideas, his tendency to organize meaningful wholes out of his experience is equally demonstrable. He tries to reduce the stream of experience to orderly sequences and patterns. He produces legends, theories, philosophies.

To an impressive degree, the theories of nature and the universe which man has developed are impersonal in the sense that they take no special account of man's own aspirations and status (though they are strictly dependent on his conceptualizing power and rarely wholly divorced from his values). Out of this impersonal search for meaning has come modern science.

But man has never been satisfied to let it go at that. He has throughout history shown a compelling need to arrive at conceptions of the universe **in terms of which he could regard his own life as meaningful**. He wants to know where he fits into the scheme of things. He wants to understand how the great facts of the objective world relate to him and what they imply for his behavior. He wants to know what significance may be found in his own existence, the succeeding generations of his kind and the vivid events of his inner life. He seeks some kind of meaningful framework in which to understand (or at least to reconcile himself to) the indignities of chance and circumstance and the fact of death. A number of philosophers and scientists have told him sternly that he must not expect answers to that sort of question, but he pays little heed. He wants, in the words of Kierkegaard, "a truth which is true for me."⁴ He seeks conceptions of the universe that give dignity, purpose and sense to his own existence.

When he fails in this effort he exhibits what Tillich describes as the anxiety of meaninglessness -- "anxiety about the loss of an ultimate concern, of a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings."⁵ As Erikson has pointed out, the young person's search for identity is in some respects this sort of search for meaning.⁶ It is a search for a framework in terms of which the young person may understand his own aims, his relation to his fellow man and his relation to larger purposes. In our society every individual is free to conduct this search on his own terms and to find, if he is lucky, the answer that is right for him.

Meaning, Purpose and Commitment

There are those who think of the meaning of life as resembling the answer to a riddle. One searches for years, and then some

bright day one finds it, like the prize at the end of a treasure hunt. It is a profoundly misleading notion. The meanings in any life are multiple and varied. Some are grasped very early, some late; some have a heavy emotional component, some are strictly intellectual; some merit the label **religious**, some are better described as **social**. But each kind of meaning implies a relationship between the person and some larger system of ideas or values, a relationship involving obligations as well as rewards. In the individual life, meaning, purpose and commitment are inseparable. When a man succeeds in the search for identity he has found the answer not only to the question "Who am I?" but to a lot of other questions too: "What must I live up to? What are my obligations? To what must I commit myself?"

So we are back to the subject of commitment. As we said earlier, a free society, will not specify too closely the kinds of meaning different individuals will find or the things about which they should generate conviction. People differ in their goals and convictions and in the whole style of their commitment. We must ask that their goals fall within the moral framework to which we all pay allegiance, but we cannot prescribe the things that will unlock their deepest motivations. Those earnest spirits who believe that a man cannot be counted worthy unless he burns with zeal for civic affairs could not be more misguided. And we are wrong when we follow the current fashion of identifying moral strength too exclusively with fighting for a cause. Nothing could be more admirable nor more appealing to a performance-minded people such as ourselves. But such an emphasis hardly does justice to the rich variety of moral excellences that man has sought and occasionally achieved in the course of history.

A good many of the most valuable people in any society will never burn with zeal for anything except the integrity and health and well-being of their own families -- and if they achieve those goals, we need ask little more of them. There are other valuable members of a society who will never generate conviction about anything beyond the productive output of their hands or mind -- and a sensible society will be grateful for their contributions. Nor will it be too quick to define some callings as noble and some as ordinary. One may not quite accept Oliver Wendell Holmes' dictum -- "Every calling is great when greatly pursued"⁷ --but the grain of truth is there.

NOTES

1. Gordon W. Allport, *Becoming* (Yale University Press, 1955), pp. 66-68.
2. M. E. Montaigne, *Essais*, Maurice Rat (ed.) (Classiques Garnier), Vol. II, p. 100.
3. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Norman H. Pearson (ed.) (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1948), p. 55.
4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journal* (Aug. 1, 1835). In Robert Bretali (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton University Press, 1946), pp. 4-5.
5. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952), p. 47.
6. "First a word about the term identity. As far as I know Freud used it only once in a more than incidental way, and then with a psychosocial connotation. It was when he tried to formulate his link to Judaism, that he spoke of an "inner identity" which was not based on race or religion, but on a common readiness to live in opposition, and on a common freedom from prejudices which narrow the use of the intellect. Here, the term identity points to an individual's link with the unique values, fostered by a unique history, of his people. Yet, it also relates to the cornerstone of this individual's unique development: for the importance of the theme of "incorruptible observation at the price of professional isolation" played a central role in

Freud's life. It is this identity of something in the individual's core with an essential aspect of a group's inner coherence which is under consideration here: for the young individual must learn to be most himself where he means most to others -- those others, to be sure, who have come to mean most to him. The term identity expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others." (Erik H. Erikson, *op. cit.*, p. 56.)

7. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Law," speech given at the Suffolk Bar Association Dinner, Feb. 5, 1885, *Speeches* (Little, Brown & Co., 1913), p. 17.